

Testimony before the Appropriations Committee Regarding  
Funding for Legal Aid in the State of Connecticut 2/19/16

My name is Alma Pollock. I am a 61 year old widow, and a Licensed Professional Counselor. Throughout my years of work as a therapist, especially when I worked in community mental health clinics, I helped my clients fill out applications for various kinds of social assistance: food stamps, cash assistance, fuel assistance, lower cost drugs from pharmaceutical companies and applications for Social Security Disability. At times I also tried to help them find secure housing. It was apparent to me, and continues to be apparent to me, that one of the most pressing needs of psychiatric patients is the need for secure housing. As Abraham Maslow pointed out, in his hierarchy of needs, if physiological and safety needs are not met, e.g., need for food and safe housing, it is difficult for an individual to try to address other problems as well.

I have bipolar disorder. I have lived with it for decades, and have worked as a clinician with it for decades. For various reasons, related both to my physical health and my psychological health, I had to leave my last full time job as a clinician and go on disability: first short term disability, then long term disability, then social security disability. I went from working a full time and an additional part time job, to not working at all. Suddenly, finding affordable housing became a very important, in fact an emergent issue.

With help from a wonderful social worker who was my therapist, I found affordable housing at a low income housing complex that serves both the elderly and the disabled. However, in January 2015, I became very ill, and was admitted on an emergency basis to Yale Psychiatric Hospital. I tried, before I went into the hospital, to speak with one of the managers of the apartment complex about paying rent, but by the time I got one of them on the phone, I was too sick to discuss it. The priority was to get me into the hospital.

After I was discharged from the hospital, when I came home, I found a "Notice to Quit" under my apartment door. One is allowed a certain amount of time to respond to such a document, but that time had already elapsed while I was in the hospital. As I recall, the documentation said if I paid any money to the management at that point, it would not count towards my rent, only towards occupancy. I did not know what to do. The problem was beyond my capacity to solve, given the recent hospitalization. Therefore I

applied for help, from New Haven Legal Assistance, so I could avoid eviction and keep my housing. Due to the efforts of my lawyer from New Haven Legal Assistance, the difficulty with the landlord was resolved, and I kept my housing.

It is now a little over a year later. I feel much better. I am actually applying for jobs as a therapist, both full time and part time. I expect to go back to work, under the Ticket to Work program. I think it is fair to say that January 2015 was a pivotable point in my life. I have no family members who can offer me financial assistance. If I had lost my housing last winter (and my possessions (clothes, books, family photographs, and even more important, my pets), I seriously doubt I would be applying for jobs now. I think I would have ended up back in the psychiatric hospital (and housing in a psychiatric hospital is really expensive). I might not have been able to recover psychologically, as well as financially, from that disaster.

I believe the State of Connecticut should continue to subsidize legal services, not only because it is the morally right thing to do (although it is). It is also the cost effective thing to do. The work lawyers do at legal services helps to keep certain social/judicial problems from becoming catastrophic problems. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. For example, what good will it do the State of Connecticut to cut support for housing lawyers, and then have to face finding emergent solutions to what is already a huge crisis in Connecticut: insufficient affordable housing. It is hard for me to believe that dealing with MORE homeless people in Connecticut, is going to save the State of Connecticut money.

May I remind you that this winter, the subzero temperatures in Connecticut made being homeless a life threatening situation.

I urge you to reconsider the proposed funding cuts for legal services, which offers critical help to families in need, with all kinds of overwhelming problems.

Sincerely,

Alma H. Pollock, M.S., L.P.C.  
March 18, 2016